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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 001976

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SUBJECT: SURAYUD'S VISIT TO MALAYSIA FOCUSES ON SOUTHERN
THAI UNREST

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 1764

Classified By: POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF MARK D. CLARK, REASON 1.4 (B AND
D).

Summary

1. (C) Thai interim Prime Minister Surayud's October 18 visit to Malaysia focused on unrest in Thailand's ethnic Malay/Muslim south. Surayud pledged Thailand would increasingly consult with Malaysia regarding efforts to end the southern conflict, according to a Thai diplomat, but Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah and Surayud did not establish any specific role for Malaysia in a future peace process. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir continues to meet with southern Thai Muslim figures. End Summary.

Surayud Explains New Approach to the South

2. (U) Interim Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont visited Kuala Lumpur on October 18 as part of his initial calls on ASEAN capitals. Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram, Defense Minister Boonward Sontas, and Deputy Interior Minister Banyat Jansena accompanied Surayud. The Thai PM's nine-hour mission included a meeting with his Malaysian counterpart Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, a joint press conference featuring the two leaders, and a separate discussion with Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. Malaysian press generated upbeat reports focused on Surayud's comments in support of a peaceful resolution to conflict, drawing contrasts with the perceived heavy-handed approach of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Speaking at the press conference, Surayud said, "I told the Malaysian Prime Minister that I will talk to the Muslim leaders in the south, talk to kids in the schools.... My strategy in trying to solve the problem is through peaceful means and I will try to seek advice and sometimes comments from Malaysia, get in touch personally and find a way through the troubled waters in southern Thailand."

Malaysia: Ready to Help, But Only if Asked

3. (U) PM Abdullah's public comments reinforced the view that Malaysia and Thailand had agreed to consult more closely to resolve the situation in southern Thailand. Speaking to reporters, Abdullah said, "We will be available to contact each other...when our attention is needed immediately to resolve some of the problems that may arise in southern Thailand.... Any program to be introduced in the region that requires our support, we will extend (such support)." Abdullah and his deputy Najib were at pains to reiterate that

Malaysia would not impose itself into a peace process or meddle in its neighbor's affairs. Najib, quoted in the official state news agency Bernama, explained that, "we are willing to play a helpful, positive role but it is entirely up to (Thailand) to determine what kind of role. We are quite happy to just sit back and watch the development because it's purely the Thai's internal problem."

Mahathir Continues Meetings with Southern Figures

14. (C) In the run-up to Surayud's visit, former Prime Minister Mahathir and his son Mukhriz publicly detailed their role in brokering talks between the Thai military and southern opposition leaders in late 2005 and early 2006. They described the initiative as completed and said it would be Thailand's decision to take any follow-up actions.

(Comment: According to a Thai diplomat, Abdullah personally approved of this activity prior to his bitter, open feud with Mahathir. End Comment.) Mahathir, however, has continued to keep contact with southern Thai leaders. On October 17, Mahathir met with the head of a Muslim school in Pattani, reportedly to discuss the needs of the Thai Muslim community and to firm up Mahathir's commitment to fund the building of a mosque. Mahathir explained he was not carrying out a peace mandate from any party.

Thailand-Malaysia Agree on Contacts, Not Peace Role

15. (C) A Thai diplomat involved in the visit told Polcouns October 19 that Surayud's agenda in Kuala Lumpur focused exclusively on the conflict in southern Thailand. Surayud had informed Abdullah that Thailand would step up its

KUALA LUMP 00001976 002 OF 002

consultations with Malaysia, and actively seek Malaysian advice on ways to end the southern insurgency. Surayud, however, did not describe this as leading to a specific Malaysian role in a peace process, and the Malaysians did not press for one. The diplomat did not know what had transpired in the four-eyes meeting between the two leaders. The diplomat offered that former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's activities with southern Thai leaders (below) had "nothing to do with the Malaysian Government." In this and previous conversations, the Thai diplomat downplayed the importance of Mahathir's actions and questioned whether his southern Thai interlocutors were relevant to ending the violence. Informed Malaysian Foreign Ministry officials were not available to us for comment on Surayud's visit.

Malaysia to Continue Cautious Approach

16. (C) Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS, a government-linked think tank) Chairman Jawhar bin Hassan told Polcouns October 18 that Malaysia would continue to be very cautious in terms of the unrest in southern Thailand. Despite strong ethnic and religious bonds between the southern Thai and Malaysia's dominant Malay/Muslim majority, the GOM would do nothing to challenge Thailand's sovereignty or to incite further unrest. If forced to choose between relations with Bangkok and those with restive southern Muslim leaders, Malaysia would choose Bangkok "hands down." He noted that Thai leaders should avoid casting blame on Malaysia for violence within Thailand's borders, as this was a sure-fire way to infuriate Kuala Lumpur. Jawhar commented that Mahathir's political opposition to Abdullah would not necessarily result in the GOM blocking a Mahathir effort to broker peace across the border. Jawhar believed that there was strong consensus among Malaysian leaders, including Abdullah and Mahathir, regarding ways to stop the conflict in southern Thailand, so there was little risk Mahathir would carry such an effort in a way contrary to GOM policy. Jawhar endorsed coordinated economic development strategies along the Malaysia-Thai border as one measure to

encourage peace. He advised, however, against Thailand bringing over Malaysian religious teachers with the intention of spreading moderate Islam among the southern Thai because most of Malaysia's current religious instructors were "intolerant" and "fundamentalist" in their outlook.

Comment

17. (C) Malaysia has welcomed the Thai Government's post-coup focus on dialogue and peaceful means to resolve on-going violence affecting Malaysia's cousins across the border. Many Malaysians blamed Thaksin for the escalation of violence in southern Thailand and privately or openly cheered his ouster (reftel). Surayud's October 18 visit reinforced Malaysians' hope that Bangkok has adopted a fresh, more conciliatory approach. This may or may not translate into any important mediating role for Malaysia. Our sense from contacts here is that the Thai have a healthy skepticism about Malaysia's ability to serve as a useful, honest broker and the GOM itself is not chomping at the bit to get too heavily involved.

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